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ABSTRACT

This paper describes home schooling in Alabama from the perspectives of public-school superintendents and home-schooling families. It is based on a study that investigated the extent, causes, and experiences of home schooling; concerns about the practice of home schooling; and the relationship between home schoolers and public-school systems. Home schooling is defined as: "parents providing their children educational opportunities in the home and community in place of attending schools," and includes those students who are enrolled in, but not physically attending, church or "cover" schools. The article reports the results of a study based on 64 superintendent surveys and 12 interviews with home-schooling families. Superintendents claimed that protecting children from negative social influences and the explicit teaching of morals and values were the most commonly espoused reasons for home schooling. Parents expressed similar concerns and also placed high importance on providing individual attention to their children and raising confident, caring, and well-rounded people. However, superintendents consistently felt that these issues were not the main concerns of home schoolers. Home-schooling parents found the quality of education, the quality of life, and the quality of socialization to be lacking in public and private schools. (Contains 25 references.) (RJM)

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Home Schooling in Alabama: Perspectives of Public School Superintendents and Home Schooling Families

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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The purpose of this study was to describe home schooling in Alabama from the perspectives of public school superintendents and home schooling families. The study investigated the extent, causes, and experiences of home schooling; concerns about the practice; and the relationship between home schoolers and public school systems. Home schooling is defined in this paper as parents providing their children educational opportunities in the home and community in place of attending schools. It includes children who are enrolled in, but do not physically attend, church or cover schools. Alabama superintendents were surveyed in the fall of 1998; home schooling families were interviewed in person and by e-mail in the spring of 1999.

An Overview of Home Schooling in the United States

There are no definitive sources for the number of children taught at home. The National Home Education Research Institute and the National Home School Legal Defense Association estimated 700,000 children were home schooled in 1995 (Legislative Office of Educational Oversight, 1995). Some advocates have claimed that as many as 1.23 million children are home schooled and the phenomena is increasing by 15 to 40 percent annually (Lyman, 1998). Lines (1996) estimated more than 500,000 were home schooled in 1996, or slightly more than one percent of school-age children. She also conjectured that six percent of U.S. families try home schooling at some point and that the average experience lasts two years.

Knowles, Marlow, and Muchmore (1992) attributed the growth of home schooling to increasingly liberal social attitudes; growing concerns about problems in schools; research supporting home schooling; effective national, state, and local organizations; and the availability of resources and correspondence courses. They also cited the growth of the religious right, the continuing civil rights movement, and more favorable media attention.

The movement is largely associated with the religious right, but fundamentalist Christians are not the only religious group involved in home schooling. Lyman (1998) noted the emergence of home school associations for Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and Mormons. Knowles et al. (1992) reported the practice among Jehovah's Witnesses. Support groups also exist for home schoolers of color and the handicapped (Lyman, 1998).

Causes of Home Schooling

Parents of home schooled children believe they can provide a better education than traditional schools can. That does not imply, however, that these parents agree on the nature or purpose of education. Van Galen's (1991) research showed home schooling parents are divided into two categories: the ideologues and the pedagogues. Ideologues "object to what they believe is being taught in public and private schools and they seek to strengthen their relationship with their children" (p. 66-67). The ideologues are fundamentalist Christians who believe that they are fulfilling a calling from God. Any external interference is perceived to be an attack on both their religion and their family. Their beliefs and values are the basis for the curriculum. The pedagogues, on the other hand, believe that "schools teach whatever they teach ineptly" (p. 71). They seek to nurture the child's intellect and creativity in a naturalistic manner. External interference is not seen as a threat. Rather, it is perceived as simply a symptom of a cold, alienated system. Taylor's (1997) examination of home schooling revealed similar agreements and differences between those who home school for pedagogical reasons and those who do so for secular reasons.

Critics of educational institutions assail more than the what and how of learning content. Holt (1989) criticized the system for relying on behaviorism as a way to force students to comply with adult goals. The promise of rewards and the threats of punishment make children more concerned with pleasing adults than growing through learning. Gatto (1992) attacked compulsory

education for damaging the human spirit through its fragmented and disconnected curriculum, reinforcement of class divisions, indifference to individuality, imposition of emotional and intellectual dependence, and concern for maintaining order. Gatto advocated an end to compulsory and monopoly schooling and a radical change in our approach to education.

The Experiences of Home Schooling

The distinction between religious and pedagogical reasons for home schooling carries over into the type of curriculum that is employed (Lines, 1996; Taylor, 1997; Van Galen, 1991). Those who home school primarily for religious reasons tend to use a basic skills approach and focus on coverage and control. Taylor (1997) attributed this to the hegemonic influence of schools. Some parents accept traditional organization and methodologies without question. The need to be accountable to school officials also influences parents to mimic the institution they rejected. Those who home school for pedagogical purposes generally use much less structure (Llewellyn, G., 1997; Pitman & Smith, 1991; Van Galen, 1991). The children are likely to direct their own learning and to pursue their own interests in the home and the community.

Many parents who home school for pedagogical reasons use Holt's writings as a guide. Holt, a humanist associated with the counter-culture of the left (Lyman, 1998). Holt argued that schools are a form of incarceration (1964). He accused schools of teaching children only to follow orders and not how to solve problems. Such views of education are rooted in the school reform movement of the 1960s. The critical voices of the era openly challenged the status quo and advocated alternatives including "voluntary attendance, informal curriculums (sic), and learning events structured around real-life experiences" (Knowles et al., 1992, p. 203).

Holt's views of learning are grounded in constructivism (1983). He called for exposing children to authentic and natural problems at an appropriate level of interest and difficulty. Holt

advocated allowing children to direct and pace their own learning by exploring their natural curiosity and desire to understand and control themselves and the environment. Holt argued that adults should provide opportunities for children to observe and participate in the process of accomplishing authentic tasks (1989).

Llewellyn (1997) applied Holt's ideas to high school age students and advised them to practice "unschooling." Llewellyn's basic argument is "that life is wonderful and schools are stifling. . . . [and] schools do the opposite of what they say they do. They prevent learning and they destroy one's love for learning" (p. 16). Llewellyn criticized the arbitrary nature of authority in schools, which "makes us lose our trust in natural authority--people who know what they're doing and could share a lot of wisdom with us" (p. 37). She contended that learning and freedom are not incompatible although schools have made them so.

Lyman (1998) described a growing public dissatisfaction with public schools and attributed it to beliefs that schools fail to produce literate graduates prepared for the world and that schools are becoming more violent. She also said the public is disenchanted with schools for failing to try innovations such as vouchers and charter schools. Lyman said home schooling parents are simply taking reform into their own hands.

Concerns about Home Schooling

Public school officials have two broad areas of concerns about home schooling: the quality of home education and the impact on public schools. School administrators and state officials question if home schooling provides sufficient structure and breadth. Other issues concern the qualifications of parents; the adequacy of resources; the amount of time devoted to education; and assessment. Questions are frequently raised about the socialization of children and the possibility of abuse and neglect (Office of Legislative Oversight, 1995; Simmons, 1994). When home schooling

is terminated, administrators worry they will be responsible for dealing with children who perform below grade level (Office of Legislative Oversight, 1995). The National Educational Association, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Parent-Teachers Association oppose home schooling (Lines, 1996; Lyman, 1998).

Research on achievement levels supports the contention that home schooled children achieve at levels at least equal to, and often above, their public school counterparts on standardized tests (Lines, 1996; Lyman, 1998; Rakestraw, 1987; Ray, B. D. & Wartes, 1991). This research is not considered definitive, however, because not all home schooled children participate in standardized testing and no research has been done on whether the same children do better in home settings or traditional classrooms (Lines, 1998).

Little research has been done on the social development of home schooled children, although studies have shown they are above average in this area (Lines, 1996; Lyman, 1998). One of these studies involved videotaping children who attended public schools and children in home schools playing together. Trained counselors evaluated the behavior of the children without knowing which children attended school. The study found no differences in self-concept or assertiveness, but the home schoolers had fewer behavioral problems (Lyman, 1988). Knowles researched the long-term effects of home schooling and found no evidence of disadvantages (Lyman, 1998). Research supports the idea that home schooling is generally at least as effective, if not better, than traditional schooling in terms of academic achievement and socialization.

Some critics of home schooling argue that home schooling may be used by extremist groups to indoctrinate children. Blacker (1998) argued that there must be a limit to what states can do in meeting the demands of such factions. He pointed to the dangers of fanatics using home schooling to prevent their children from hearing messages of pluralism. Blacker stated that compulsory

attendance at state-sanctioned schools prevents parents from intellectually enslaving their children.

Tompkins (1991) framed an argument in favor of home schooling based on a right to privacy regardless of religious beliefs. He contended that parents, not the state, have the primary power to make educational, health, and physical welfare decisions and that the state does not have a right to intervene "unless it asserts a compelling interest in preparing children to exercise the franchise and it has chosen the least restrictive means to protect that interest" (p. 323).

The Laws of Alabama and Other States

Home schooling is legal in all states, although the laws vary considerably. Alabama laws require that all children between the ages of seven and 16 be enrolled in a public, private, or church school or be instructed by a private, certified tutor (Alabama, 1995). Tutors are required to follow the state's curricular mandates and to work a minimum of three hours a day for 140 days a year. In addition, the tutor is required to register with the local superintendent and document the children he or she works with, the subjects covered, the amount of time of instruction, and attendance records. Church schools are not required to provide such records to the state (Alabama, 1995). Alabama's laws are more restrictive than some states but less intrusive than others. Oklahoma and Texas permit home schooling without any restrictions or registration requirements (Lyman, 1998). Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York closely regulate the practice by requiring state approval of curriculum, home visits, and the submission of standardized test scores (Lyman, 1998).

Home Schools and the Courts

The U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled directly in a home schooling case. Supporters contend the practice is protected by the Constitution. They cite the 1972 Wisconsin v. Yoder decision exempting Amish children from compulsory high school attendance; the 1925 Pierce v. Society of Sisters decision upholding parental rights to choose private Catholic schools; and the

1927 Farrington v. Tokushige decision limiting a state's regulatory powers over private schools (Knowles et al., 1992). The Wisconsin decision is the most important because it directly addressed parental rights, but it dealt only with exemptions based on religion and expressly excluded personal and philosophical reasons (Knowles et al., 1992).

In the last two decades, state courts have dealt with a variety of home schooling issues, such as if states can make attendance compulsory, if parents must be certified teachers, if home schools qualify as private schools, and if home schools must be equivalent to public schools. There was no consensus among the decisions. Suits were most often brought by school officials but parents won in the majority of cases (Knowles, et al. 1992).

One unresolved question is whether home schoolers have the right to participate in extra-curricular activities. Webb (1997) reviewed conflicting state court rulings. In an Arkansas case, a court determined that "a high school football player who had the potential to obtain a college scholarship did, indeed, have a property interest in participation" (p. 127). Webb asserted the due process and equal protection clauses of the Constitution mean that home schooled children should not be denied participation in sports since "the classification created different treatment of students" (p. 132). Webb futher contended that "rules prohibiting participation are not rationally related to any state interest" (p. 132).

Relations between Home Schoolers and Public Schools

The differences between why people choose home schooling and the different types of educational experiences they provide spills over to the relationship they would like to have with public school officials. Some favor a complete separation; others favor creating relationships based on mutual respect and genuine interest (Taylor, 1997).

Simmons (1994) suggested that public schools stop treating home schooling as a "subversive activity" (p. 49). Several innovative models of cooperation exist. The public school system in Des Moines, Iowa, instituted a program for home schooling based on support rather than control (Dahl, 1996). The system allows students to enroll on a part-time basis and provides resource teachers, model curricula, and special activities for home school children. In addition, the school helps parents decide how to best assess learning by offering alternatives from standardized tests to portfolios. The Uxbridge, Massachusetts, school district provides vouchers of up to $2,000 for secular education expenses to home schooling parents who cover the state mandated curriculum, document they have met a minimum numbers of hours, and have their children participate in state assessments (Harrington-Lueker, 1997).

Summary of The Issues

The home schooling movement raises fundamental questions that are both practical and philosophical in nature. Does the primary responsibility for education lie with the state or the parents? Can that responsibility be shared, and if so, how? To what extent should the state mandate or regulate education for all children? Do public schools have a responsibility to all children or just those who attend public schools? Meaningful answers to these questions must be built upon an understanding of who chooses to home school and why.

Results of the Alabama Superintendents' Survey

The superintendents' survey was developed from the literature on home schooling and addressed five specific areas: the extent of home schooling in the local system; parents' stated reasons for home schooling; superintendents' concerns about the practice; the relationship between home schoolers and public schools; and parents' stated reasons for enrolling children in public schools. The survey concluded with an open-ended question on how superintendents believed they

should respond in the future to parents who want to teach their children at home. A definition of home schooling was included on the survey that included children who are enrolled in church schools in compliance with state laws.

Administration of the Survey and Response Rate

The survey was mailed to all 128 public school superintendents in Alabama in the fall of 1998. The mailing included a cover letter and stamped, self-addressed return envelope. A second mailing was sent to superintendents who had not responded within three weeks. Follow-up phone calls were made two weeks later to request the survey be completed or to complete it by telephone. Eighty of the 128 superintendents responded to the survey for a 63% response rate. Six of these did not fill in the survey. Two, however, included comments that were useful in understanding the concerns of public school officials. The adjusted response rate is 59%. Rural and suburban districts responded to the survey more than urban districts.

Not all superintendents completed all parts of the survey. Some noted that they skipped some sections because the information was not available. Home schooling parents are required by Alabama law to register with the public schools, but are not required to give their reasons. The number of respondents for each section is included in the discussion of results.

The Extent of Home Schooling in Alabama

The superintendents who completed the section on the number of home schooled children (n=64) reported a total of 4,590 home schoolers. There was tremendous variation in the reported number of home schooled children in each district. Five superintendents stated there were no home schooled children in their districts. Forty-seven superintendents reported between one and 100 home schoolers; seven reported between 100 and 200; three reported between 201 and 300; one reported between 301 and 400; and one reported 1,424 home schoolers.

The extent of home schooling can be analyzed by comparing the number of home schooled children to the school-age population. Fifty-two districts provided both figures. The result indicated that 1.53% of children are home schooled in these districts. The number of home schoolers can also be compared to the number of students enrolled in public schools. Sixty-five superintendents provided information for both items. The result was that home schoolers are 1.56% of public school enrollment in these districts. These findings can be compared to national estimates of home schooling. The most objective source for this information is Lines' (1996) study, which estimated that 1% of school age children are taught at home. The results of this survey indicate that the incidence of home schooling in Alabama is slightly above the national average.

The literature on home schooling indicates that it is a growing trend (Office of Oversight, 1995; Lines, 1996; Ray, 1997). To assess if this is the case in Alabama, superintendents were asked how many children left public schools to be educated at home and how many home schoolers enrolled in public schools. The superintendents (n=49) reported that a total of 1,102 withdrew and 188 enrolled. Furthermore, 69% of these districts reported more children leaving public schools for home education than enrolling in public schools after a home schooling experience. These statistics point to a growing home schooling movement in Alabama.

Who is home schooling?

National statistics indicate that home schooling is most popular for younger children. Ray (1997) found that 61% of home schooled children are between the ages of 5 and 11; 18% are between 12 and 13; and 20% are between 14 and 18. This finding generally applies in Alabama. Superintendents (n=58) reported that 60% of the children taught at home are elementary age; 26% are middle school age; and 14% are high school age. The discrepancy in the middle and high school

categories between the national and state statistics may not be significant. The difference may simply be the result of varying definitions of the ages or grades in a middle or high school.

What reasons do parents give for home schooling?

The superintendents were given a list of reasons parents commonly give for home schooling and asked to rank them according to the frequency the reasons are given. Some superintendents noted that parents are not asked their reasons and so did not complete this section. For those districts that did respond (n=48), strong consensus emerged on both the most frequent and least frequent reasons cited by home schooling parents.

Parents most often state they are seeking to protect children from negative societal influences. This item was ranked as the most frequent reason by 22 superintendents and ranked second by 7. Two comments offered by superintendents illuminate what parents may mean by negative societal influences. One wrote, "Parents want to keep [the] child away from the bad kids." Another noted that parents are "fearful of peer influence on their children." The second most frequent reason given to school districts is the explicit teaching of morals and values. This item was ranked first by 13 superintendents and second by 18.

There was also a strong consensus that some stated reasons for home schooling found in the literature are infrequently cited in Alabama. The items which dealt with gaining a deeper understanding of the child's development, using a curriculum derived from the real world, and putting more emphasis on intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards were consistently ranked low. This supports the idea that the majority of superintendents believe that most home schooling families in Alabama are primarily concerned with promoting and protecting their religious beliefs from the negative influences of a hostile secular world.

Some superintendents indicated they respect the right of parents to leave public schools. One superintendent wrote, "I am thankful that we live in a free country where people can make decisions concerning the welfare and destiny of their families. It is their right to do so even if I or others might disagree with their choices." Another respondent stated, "It is the right of every parent to choose the educational setting which best meets the needs of their child."

Not all school officials, however, are comfortable with home schooling. They question whether parents have the best interests of the child at heart. Several superintendents added comments indicating that parents may have unstated reasons for choosing to home school. One superintendent bluntly stated, "Parents don't give reasons! They just withdraw students when they decide they can't get their own way in public schools." Another respondent warned of potential dangers to both the child and society, commenting that parents follow "the teachings of cults in the name of religion endangering the lives of their children, separating them from the mainstream of society creating emotional cripples who, without a quality education, must depend on government support as unemployable adults."

There is evidence in the survey, however, that parents are also concerned about the quality of education available in the public schools. Superintendents were asked how many families cited religion as their primary reason for home schooling, how many cited the quality of education, and how many cited the two as equal. Again, some respondents noted that the central office does not have this information. Of those that responded (n=34), 45% of home schooling families cited religion as their primary reason; 27% the quality of education; and 28% cited both. Some superintendents stated that they promote the quality of education available in the public schools when speaking to parents who are considering home schooling.

These findings support the contention that home schooling in Alabama cannot be seen only in light of the separation of church and state. Religious reasons are predominant, but are not exclusive. It is possible that Alabama laws predispose superintendents and parents to cite religion as the main cause of home schooling. Alabama laws allow home schooling without regulation when it is done through a church school or private certified tutor. The church school provision may be seen as a less expensive and burdensome option.

What are the concerns of public school superintendents?

The survey included a list of issues that are commonly cited in the literature on home schooling. Superintendents were asked to rank the items according to the level of concern in their districts. This section generated the highest response rate (n=68). The superintendents were most concerned that parents may be incapable or unqualified. This item was ranked first by 28 respondents; it was ranked second by 14. One superintendent emphatically stated that home schooling, in his opinion, does not work for middle and high school age students. "NO! parent," he wrote, "has that kind of knowledge." Another participant stated, "The quality of education varies widely with the ability of the parent."

Superintendents were also concerned that instruction may be inadequate in depth and/or breadth. This item was ranked first by 17 superintendents; it was ranked second by 25. This is consistent with and related to the first concern that parents are incapable or unqualified. One superintendent commented, "A lot of our dropouts take the home school route and never follow through." Some superintendents also blame church schools or other home schooling organizations for this concern, claiming that they are inferior to public schools. Another participant was critical of "home schooling companies [which] are unregulated and offer extremely low quality materials,

training, and supervision while charging large sums of money.... Home schooling companies are in the business to make money and have no care nor concern for the students' welfare or education."

Superintendents were also concerned about home schoolers entering public schools below grade level. This item was ranked first by 17 participants; it was ranked second by four. Several commented that this concern is the result of the preceding ones. One noted, "Some of the children who come back into our system are very far behind our basic educational concepts." Two participants indicated their districts use placement or achievement tests to determine grade levels of children who return to public schools. Another participant wrote, "Students returning to public schools from home schooling situations are far behind other students in the same grade and of the same ability level, yet parents expect students to be returned to the grade they would have been in if they had continued to pass in public schools."

The survey also revealed some consensus on concerns about the social isolation of children. This item was ranked first by 16 superintendents and second by 7. There was similar agreement that instructional time might be insufficient. This item was ranked first by 10 participants and second by 11.

What public school services are available for home schoolers?

One section of the survey was a list of services that some U.S. public schools provide to home schoolers. Alabama superintendents were asked to identify any service currently offered by their districts. Of those that responded (n=58), the majority offered virtually no services. Home schoolers can take the state exit exam in 25 districts and standardized tests in 10. A home school liaison is provided by 17 districts to help families understand state or local requirements. Home schoolers can take drivers' education classes in seven districts, although one restricts this to summer. Five districts permit access to libraries and computers and three permit access to

counselors, psychologists, or nurses. Three districts permit participation in extra-curricular activities such as clubs or after-school classes. One allows home schoolers to join field trips. No superintendents reported providing a home school teacher or resource center, permitting participation in sports, or reimbursing parents for educational expenses.

The information above supports the idea that once a family decides to home school in Alabama, there is virtually no contact with the public schools. Most public schools do not want to be a resource for home schoolers. As one participant wrote, "Our philosophy has been that if one makes a decision to home school, he/she assumes the complete responsibility for the child's education." Another added, "I don't believe we should use any public school resources for home schooling." The same respondent added that he fully supports the right to home school.

Not all superintendents, however, feel there should be a strict separation between public schools and home schoolers. One wrote, "If we believe that the future of our society depends upon educated citizens, then when home schooling becomes a choice, it is in all of our best interests to ensure that the child is successful." Another superintendent noted, "For the future, I feel we must work more closely with home schoolers and begin to offer more extensive services. Allowing high school students to enroll part-time for vocational classes, drivers' education, and participate in the state exit exams are logical first steps."

Why do home schoolers enroll in public schools?

This section listed reasons parents have given for enrolling their children in public schools after home schooling and asked superintendents to rank them according to the frequency they were given in their districts. The response rate (n=47) indicates this data is not available in all districts.

The lack of certain classes or activities was ranked first or second by 29 superintendents as the most frequent reason for returning to public schools. In addition, superintendents were asked to

identify which classes or activities were cited. The responses and the frequency follow: sports (25); foreign languages (24); drivers' education (20); science (17); math (16); music (10); (8); physical education (9); art (8); English (6); social studies (4). These responses are somewhat surprising given the previously discussed concerns of superintendents, which had an implicit focus on "the basics."

The second most common reason that school officials are aware of is the social isolation of children. This was ranked first or second by 27 superintendents. There is likely a connection between this response and those who turn to public schools for sports as noted above.

The expense of home schooling and the lack of curriculum materials and technological support were tied for the third most frequently stated reason for enrolling in public schools. These items were listed first or second on 19 surveys. It is rare for home schoolers to enter Alabama public schools because of social disapproval or legal problems with school officials.

Conclusions

The most significant findings of this survey are:

1. The incidence of home schooling in Alabama (approximately 1.5%) is slightly above the national average and appears to be a growing trend.

2. The most frequently espoused reasons are to protect the child from negative social influences and to teach morals and values explicitly.

3. Home schooling in Alabama is frequently grounded in religion, but the quality of education is also a significant factor. State laws may encourage officials to see home schooling as a religious rather than educational issue.

4. Superintendents are most concerned about the capabilities and qualifications of parents; the depth and breadth of curricula; the achievement levels of home schooled children who enroll in

public schools; and social isolation. The research shows these concerns are not valid for most home schoolers.

5. There is virtually no contact between public schools and home schooling families in Alabama.

6. Home schoolers who enter public schools are most likely to do so when they are in middle or high school. The most commonly espoused reason is to access specific classes or activities, particularly sports and driver's education.

The Home Schoolers' Perspective

The purpose of this phase of the study was to understand the phenomena from the perspective of those home schooling parents. A structured interview format was used to explore reasons for choosing home schooling; educational philosophies, goals, and curriculum; and the relationship between home schooling families and Alabama public schools.

Description of Participants

Participants were recruited through contacts in home school organizations. Six families were interviewed in their homes and six more via an e-mail survey in the spring of 1999. The socio-economic status of the families interviewed in person ranged from working class to upper middle class. All participants were white; all but one were female. There were 13 girls and 18 boys among the families. There was considerable variety in the number of years the families have home schooled. Three families were in their first year; five families have home schooled for more than ten years. Three families had exclusively home schooled; eight also had experiences with public or private schools. All families were traditional in that the father worked outside the home and the mothers had the primary, but not exclusive, responsibility for the children. Two mothers worked in family businesses inside the home. The names of participants were changed to protect anonymity.

Eight of the 12 participants lived outside of Alabama at some point. This varied from being born and raised in another region in the country, to living on another continent doing missionary work, to living in other states because of a job transfer. It is possible that this may have influenced the participants to be more likely to question educational practices in Alabama, to consider other educational options, or to be more willing to speak to a researcher.

The participants and their experiences illustrate the diversity of home schooling in the state of Alabama. There is an inherent bias in this study in that all the home schooling parents were confident in their ability to provide an education for their children that surpasses the education available in traditional schools.

Methodology

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth, structured interviews either in the participants' homes or by e-mail. This methodology seeks to develop a holistic view of a phenomenon in its entirety to yield a complete understanding of the experience. After each interview, I recorded my observations and initial, tentative analysis on a contact summary form. I used a cross-case approach for analysis of the data. After transcribing the tapes, I coded the transcripts and summary forms, using Patton's (1990) methodology for phenomenological analysis. Three participants reviewed the findings and offered comments.

Reasons for Home Schooling

The reasons stated by home schooling parents in Alabama did not always break down into distinct religious or pedagogical categories. Most participants cited several reasons for teaching their children at home. Participants who might appear on the surface to be clearly in one category or the other express remarkably similar views of traditional education. They are critical of the poor academic achievement and negative socialization effects of schools. They object to the lack of

individual attention in instruction and to the bureaucratic relationships between teachers and students. One parent described traditional schooling as a "frustrated system." Their criticisms cannot be dismissed easily since all of the participants based their views on their own experiences as parents, teachers, and students.

Home Schooling Parents in Traditional Schools

Four mothers had taught in traditional schools and cited the experience as a cause of teaching their own children at home. Sally is a devout Christian who had been a public and private school teacher in Alabama and is now an administrator of a church school. Her Christian orientation to life places her in the ideological category. Yet her criticisms of public schools are not limited to religious ideology. She recalled, "I saw just the lack of discipline, the lack of cooperation in the students, the lack of desire to learn." Sally believed that as a teacher, "You just can't hardly do anything because the kids . . . are so wounded from home life and situations that they can't deal with." Sally was also concerned about the lack of individual attention. She said, "They're stuck in the system because there are so many students that have to have their needs met. And a smart child can get pushed aside, just as well as a child who has learning disabilities." Other participants concurred that teachers are asked to do an impossible job in society today.

Another mother had taught in public schools in the Midwest before moving to Alabama. Betty is currently the administrator of a cover school that accepts people of all faiths. Her educational beliefs and practices are most consistent with the pedagogical classification. She too developed a negative view of public education from teaching. She reported,

> Each year I became more discouraged with the number of students per classroom and the lack of being able to work with the children on their educational level, the particular interests, and their learning style. The behavior was becoming increasingly worse, so much

of the teacher's time was spent on making sure everyone was safe. I also found the quality of socialization to be horrible. Children were using other children as their role models and were unable to adequately relate to those younger than themselves or older. I was concerned about the academics since so much time was wasted. Those way behind were not given enough one-on-one attention while those that were bright were thoroughly wasting their time and bored! I also found the morals and ethics about competition in a negative sense not to my liking.

Another participant taught in private schools for two years and is married to a public school teacher. Penny cited the negative social influences of other children, noting that even when the teacher is a good influence, "they've got 25 other influences. So it's not like the adult and appropriate behavior is the major influence." As a private school teacher, she felt that "even though it was a Christian school, there was all of these kids that their parents seem to have just sent them to this Christian school for us to straighten out." Mary, who recently worked in a private school, held similar views. She described observing middle school students' fascination with "crude" elements of popular culture and wondering, "Do they really need this?"

Children's Experiences in Traditional Schools

Some participants arrived at their decision to home school from their observations and experiences as parents. Cathy stated that she and her husband had always intended to home school, but when her son reached kindergarten age, circumstances surrounding a move led her to enroll him in a public school in a neighboring state. She recalled getting daily negative reports from the teacher. She found the reports surprising because the child she knew "was really very compliant . . . really strives hard to do the right thing." (She noted with a laugh that her second son was not that way.) Cathy was not critical of the teacher, but felt that a kindergarten class with 27 students was

not manageable. The final straw came in November. Cathy described picking him up one day and finding him "soaked from his belt to his ankles on both sides of his pants. He had peed all over himself. When I talked to him about it, he said that he had been that way the whole day and that the teacher had never said anything." When Cathy discussed this with the teacher, who said she wasn't aware of the incident, although "she realized that he had asked to go the bathroom a couple of times" but not at appropriate moments. She immediately decided to pull her child out and teach him at home.

Sarah shared a similar story about her son's negative experiences in another state and Alabama. She was concerned that "he'd bring home information about R-rated movies" and that on field trips she overheard "children talking about their older brother with a gun." Sarah described inexperienced teachers who damaged her son's self-esteem. In kindergarten, he came home one day and said, "I'm just a trouble maker. That's what my teacher says anyway." When Sarah asked more about what had happened, the boy reported that it was because he had to go to the bathroom at inappropriate times. In first grade, her son began to act out at home. She also described her son regularly crying over homework. Sarah was also concerned about the lack of discipline in the school. She once witnessed a child "screaming at the secretary . . . 'I'm gonna knock your head off. I'm gonna knock your head off.'" She recalled that the child repeated the threat over and over before storming back to class. She also noted socialization issues. As a Cub Scout leader, she was concerned the boys "came in all making paper guns they learned how to make at school. Maybe my expectations are too high, but Cub Scouts are supposed to be a learning environment. Learning how to make paper guns is not what I had in mind." Sarah was also troubled by violence in the local school systems. She reported that a friend's child had recently been stabbed in school. Finally, she was concerned that the school her son attended was supposed to be a magnet school for math and

science, but "the internal dynamics are no different." Her observations of the school led her to conclude that it was more "crowd control" than anything else. Sarah stated religion played a part in her decision but that her husband is not a religious man.

Gail reported that her children had attended public schools in a northeastern state, but had problems in Alabama public schools. A daughter in upper elementary found herself repeating what she had already learned in her former school. Gail reported "the kids seemed to make fun of her because she already knew the answers to so many questions. So she just got quieter and quieter in school." Gail also reported that her daughter was traumatized when other children were paddled. (She did not authorize paddling for her children.) Gail first considered teaching her children herself when her daughter asked to be home schooled. Her sons also had problems in Alabama schools. The middle child was bored by the content, especially in science. Other students who had been mainstreamed and were "roaming around the room, talking to themselves, rocking in their desks" distracted him. The boy had learned to write in cursive in his old school, but was forced to print in his Alabama school. He was often punished for poor handwriting by being held back during recess or gym. Gail described this son as "discouraged." She also reported that her youngest child, a kindergartner, loved school, but she was concerned that "children were injured while [the teacher] was there in the room, even to the point of one child having to have stitches." Gail worried this child would have problems in first grade when he would have to sit still more. Another deciding factor in this family was the lack of library resources and computers in the public schools.

Rule-Bound Schools

The inflexibility of school rules led two families to opt out of the public schools. Michelle requested the school allow her kindergarten-aged daughter to enroll in first grade. The school refused even though "she was reading and writing short stories." She also pulled her son out

because he "was having difficulty reading. I felt that he needed the extra attention in that area, which would also help him improve overall because reading is so basic to all learning." In the other family, an elementary son missed a month of school because of illness. Marie reported that the school's rules are that "if you miss more than 10 days of excused and 10 days unexcused, you fail. He makes very high grades, and we didn't want him to fail because of attendance."

The stated reasons for home schooling are not primarily religious. Their experiences and observations of traditional schools led them to look for alternatives. Some parents tried private schools but also found them lacking. Others rejected private schools because of cost or because the private schools in their area were religious. Some commented they would consider putting their children back in public schools at some point in the future if an illness made them unable to home school. Some parents of elementary children thought it possible they might enroll a child for high school if the child needed it academically or for athletic opportunities. Two families educate one or two children at home but send others to traditional schools. Home schooling is essentially an individual choice for parents, who often consider numerous factors. The most important of these factors is frustration with existing schools for failing to meet the individual needs of children. The religious and spiritual beliefs are not a direct cause of home schooling for parents in this study. Religious and spiritual beliefs do, however, play a larger role in shaping parents' views of the purposes of education, their educational philosophies, and the curriculum they choose or design.

Goals of Home Schooling

There is no single model of home schooling. One participant explained that defining home schooling "is sort of like trying to describe the color red to a blind person. Everyone who makes the definition is going to be slightly different. You're all going to be describing red, but it's going to be

30 shades of red." The families in this study were all different, although clusters emerged in their reasons, purposes, and methods for home schooling.

Most participants in this study felt education is more than simply mastering academics. Nearly all of the parents stated they want their children to be lifelong learners and people who think for themselves rather than follow others. Some home schooling parents felt that raising their children to be good Christians is a primary goal; others described their main goal as raising well-rounded, independent, caring people.

Other researchers have theorized that the distinction between religious and pedagogical reasons for home schooling influences curriculum and instruction (Lines, 1996; Taylor, 1997; Van Galen, 1991). The distinction was true to some extent for participants in this study. Some chose Christian church schools closely aligned with their religious beliefs; others opted for church schools described as cover schools which welcome people of diverse spiritual backgrounds. Those who described themselves as Christian home schoolers tended to use more traditional textbooks and curriculum models. These parents were also more likely to speak of the importance of covering the basic subjects and to direct what the children learn. Parents who anticipated returning their child to a traditional school at some point in the future also tended to be more concerned with following the state curriculum. Those who chose cover schools with open enrollment policies were more likely to follow the unschooling model (Holt, 1964, 1983, 1989; Llewellyn, 1997) which advocates nurturing innate curiosity and creativity rather than covering a prescribed body of knowledge in a linear fashion. Unschoolers favor child-directed learning in the home and community.

Life-Long and Practical Learning

Nearly all participants reported wanting to instill a life-long love of learning. Sally, a Christian home schooler, wants her children to feel "nothing is impossible. And if we want to do it,

we can find the materials to do it." For her, the purpose of education is "to teach the child that learning can be a fun experience and an interesting process." It is important for her that her children see her learning. "They see that and they see that if we don't know it, we can go and find out and that it's a continual process. It never ends." Gail, an unschooling advocate, explained that her "goal as a home schooling family is to live a lifestyle of continual learning and to have our children confident in their ability to learn anything they desire to learn." She also wants her children "to view knowledge and learning as a lifelong quest, not something that ends when you receive a diploma."

The idea that education is more than book learning was also important to many participants. Sarah drew on her nursing experience to explain the value of practical learning. She remembered, "When I first got out of nursing school, I had my BSN [bachelor of science in nursing]. I knew more than the LPN [licensed practical nurse]. . . . But yet when I got out on the floor, . . . they just outshone me. They had all the practical skills. So I guess there's just more to education than just reading a book." As a result, she uses a lot of hands-on activities. Home schooling children in this study reported building computers, birdhouses and rafts; working on theater productions; cultivating gardens; organizing literature discussion groups; rebuilding car engines; volunteering in a botanical center; making films; and serving apprenticeships in the community.

Raising Caring and Confident People

Another common theme was a desire to raise children who will be confident in their ability to make a difference in the world. Those who home school within the Christian tradition generally described this in terms of outreach to disadvantaged members of society. Both Christian home schoolers and unschoolers emphasized the importance of developing the child's confidence. Cathy, a Christian home schooling mother, said, "education is more than academics. I think that academics

are really important and that's something that we work on. But I think it is also about character and value systems." She wants her children "to be able to do something that they love and to be able to really get a reward out of that and to be able to really go for it. . . . We're trying to give them a good foundation of confidence."

Cathy believes a Christian home schooling background will make her children leaders rather than followers. She recalled a discussion she once had with other home schooling mothers. They were discussing how they did not want their children to be different from others. But suddenly they realized, "What are we talking about? We do want our kids to be different!" She wants them to be leaders who can help change some of the negative aspects of society.

Penny, another Christian home schooler, spoke of keeping "our influences the major influences in his life. . . and having them grow up to be good people" grounded in the Bible and Christian values. She and her husband want to teach their children about getting along with others. To accomplish this, the family works with the Salvation Army, sponsors children at Christmas time, and is considering taking in a foster child. She wants her children to know "that we've been given a lot and we should continue that through other people." Penny's son explained that he felt traditional schools tended to turn people into "people pleasers." As a home schooler, he felt freer to think for himself and act independent of negative peer pressure. Other Christian home schoolers are also engaged in community-based activities.

Addressing Individuality

All participants noted that their children receive more individualized attention than would be possible in a traditional school. Several parents referred to the individual learning styles and personalities of their children. Barbara, for example, described the different ways her children

learned to read. The oldest had learned in a traditional kindergarten through phonics, the younger children follow a whole language approach.

Other parents were concerned that traditional schools resort to giving negative labels when children have difficulty. Cathy noted that her younger son is "taking a lot longer to read than my first one had. But he's finally coming around. But for a while there I thought he'd never learn the alphabet! But he just didn't care. He was zipping through everything else.... But he just could have cared less about reading." Cathy was concerned that he would likely have been labeled a failure if he had been in a traditional school. She also noted that her older son had gone through a phase in which he wanted to make an art project out of every task. The result was that he often took much longer to finish than another child might have. In school, she thought her son "would have probably been labeled ADD [attention deficit disorder]." She was concerned that labeling the child "would have probably killed the artistic bent in him." Instead, she was able to find ways to channel his interests and talents.

Individualization can also take the form of spending extra time on a topic that is especially interesting or difficult for a child. Marie said, "We have more control over what we study and when and for how long. If we are working a history lesson and he is very interested in it, we don't have to stop just because our time for history is up. Cathy pointed out that she is able to stay with difficult material until it is mastered. She reassures her children by saying, "I know you don't like it. And I'm here with you. . . . We're going to work this out. And we're going to learn it. And that means if we have to stay on this for week, it doesn't matter to me. We're going to get through this and you're going to understand it."

Individualization has an additional meaning for unschooling parents. Unschoolers describe their roles as supporters or facilitators as the child directs his or her own learning." Betty described

this as trusting "your child to decide when they are ready developmentally to take on a skill or concept. . . to decide what materials are best suited for them to learn a subject, and trust in the child as to what subjects they're interested in and relevant to their life." Another unschooler, Gail challenged the notion that there is a basic body of knowledge every child needs. She asserted, "Each child is different and will require a different 'core knowledge,' not the standard one, for their given life. The best that we can do is to help them acquire the knowledge that they will need for their life, not some standardized knowledge that some unknown educator has decided is important."

Both Christian home schoolers and unschoolers in this study generally felt that education is more than the content of textbooks, that education should foster a love of learning, and that their ultimate goal is raising a moral, confident, and well-rounded person. In addition, home schooling parents believe they provide a level of individual attention not possible in schools.

Curricula

Participants in this study followed one of three paths regarding curriculum. The few parents who anticipated returning their child to schools in the future were concerned with using the same curricula and texts so their children would not fall behind. A second group used published curricula as a starting point but was eclectic in that they were careful to select books that meet the individual needs and interests of their children and add other resources. A third group, the unschoolers, rejected formal curricula and looked for any resources that appeal to the child.

Experienced home schoolers reported that many more materials are available to them now than in the past. Several participants noted that they use mail order to obtain resources. Several reported using A Beka Books and Bob Jones University Press, which are publishers of Christian texts marketed directly to home schoolers. Others obtain texts and other materials from teacher

stores. Several reported using E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy (1987) and his series of books on what children need to know at different grade levels to guide what they teach.

Unschoolers in this study rejected formal curriculum. Barbara is opposed to using a curriculum designed for a specific age since she believes such distinctions are a "farce." She described it as "an attempt to control what is basically uncontrollable . . . . You shouldn't even try because most of the times when you try, you disrupt the natural flow of the river and natural flow of the river is probably the best one for the entire landscape." Betty, another unschooler, reported using "several books and courses of study to keep abreast of what children should know at each grade level, however I take that with a big grain of salt." Betty has used textbooks for math and grammar, but her children helped her decide which ones were best. A condensed list of some of the resources she has used included the public library, the Internet, computer games, bookstores, classes in dance, theater, or art, television, radio, museums, newspapers, businesses, courtrooms, and historical sites. Betty's children have also learned through doing. Their activities have included publishing newsletters, putting on plays, visiting Vietnam veterans, professional artists, professional writers, biologists, volunteering in libraries and museums, taking part in a living history re-creation, attending plays, joining a local writers guild, and traveling.

Testing in the Home

Home schoolers who use traditional approaches to curriculum may or may not test their children on a regular basis. One reported using the tests that come with purchased curriculum; another reported making up her own tests and giving them on Fridays. Most home schoolers, however, were not very concerned with tests. Sally, a former teacher, stated that home schoolers don't need to be tested. She explained, "A teacher didn't get to see all their daily work. So therefore, she has to test to see if they're learning this material. But I don't need that."

Unschoolers do not worry about testing their children at home. Gail said, "I can see on a day to day level that my children are learning, and have come to believe that it's not what they learn that is so important, but that they have the ability to learn and adapt to our changing society. So, I guess you could say that we don't assess our children's learning, nor do we worry about what they are learning."

Home Schoolers and Standardized Testing

Alabama laws do not require home schoolers to submit standardized test scores, but some church and cover schools do require standardized tests. Most parents in this study reported that their children scored in the average to the above average ranges. This is consistent with Rudner's (1999) national study on the scholastic achievement of home school children. Rudner's analysis of scores from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) found that "the median test scores were typically in the 70th to 80th percentile [and] 25% of home school students are enrolled one or more grades above their age-level public and private school peers" (p. 1).

None of the Alabama parents in this study placed a great emphasis on the standardized tests. Sally, who is a Christian church school administrator, tests her own children annually since she organizes testing for her organization. If she wasn't already involved in the testing, she said she would probably only do it every other year since "it's just to have reassurance that everything's going as it should."

Unschoolers were openly critical of standardized testing. Gail, for instance, has had her children take standardized tests, but she does not view them "as an assessment of what they are learning. We have mainly used them as practice, since it is likely that the children will want to go to college and it may be necessary for them to take such tests to gain admission.

Opinions on Alabama Home Schooling Laws

All of the participants in this study are currently home schooling under the church school provision. Sally, a Christian church school administrator, felt that the current system keeps the state from putting more restrictions on home schoolers. She said, "As a home schooling community, we like the way that it is set up because it's not under so much direct supervision of the state . . . . When the state gets into the direct supervision of things, it just gets more restrictive and more restrictive. And we don't want that . . . . We don't want too many home schooling laws in Alabama. We like it the way that it is."

The few participants who reported being dissatisfied with the laws of Alabama all felt coerced by the church school provision. Gail said, "I do not think that religion should have to be part of a family's decision to home school. . . . I would love to see it just be a constitutional right to educate your child any way you see fit." Gail also expressed a concern that any changes in the law would result in greater state control. She said, "I'm not sure that now is the time to open up that can of worms. It would only lead to more restrictions and regulations on home schooling. The best that we can do right now is to make more church covers available that don't require statement of faith, and that is being done."

All of the home schoolers in this study have been able to find a church school or cover school with which they are comfortable. Alabama home schoolers are concerned about further restrictions on the practice. There are no efforts at this time to change the home schooling statutes in Alabama. Home school organizations in the state continually monitor the legislative situation both in Alabama and across the nation.

Responses to Superintendents' Concerns

Home schooling parents were asked to respond to the concerns of Alabama public school superintendents about the practice. The four most commonly cited concerns were:

1. Parents may be incapable or unqualified.
2. Instruction may be inadequate in depth and/or breadth.
3. Home schoolers entering public school perform below grade level.
4. Home schooled children are socially isolated.

The parents felt these concerns were invalid, although some restricted their comments to their own experiences with home schooling or to the experiences of others with which they were familiar. A few participants acknowledged that home schooling does not work for everyone and that some parents do not take the responsibility for teaching their children seriously enough. The parents sometimes cited different reasons for disagreeing with the superintendents' concerns.

Parental Capabilities and Qualifications

All participants stated they felt fully capable of providing an appropriate education for their children. Marie asserted, "If the parent truly cares about the child learning, they will make sure they are capable of teaching the child." Gail felt that, "If a parent is concerned enough for their child and their child's education, they will do all they can to become informed." Sally addressed the parental role in a broader context. She stated, "The parent is much more qualified because they have the caring attitude. I mean, a parent is a teacher because that's what they are. They're teaching their children tremendous other things, more than just academics. . . . I'm to teach my child to be a responsible citizen, a responsible Christian, a person that cares." Gail, an unschooler, offered a different view. She explained, "children can learn on their own. They don't need a teacher. They need someone to provide resources and help, but they don't need someone to spoon feed them."

A few parents discussed their own formal and informal education in response to this concern. Penny cited her undergraduate degree in English and added, "I think I'm intelligent enough and know enough resources that I can come up with what they need to know." Michelle noted, "I have a bachelor's degree in three areas, and have completed coursework on a master's degree. I've done and studied everything that my kids are trying now. I had to learn it, so therefore I can teach it, sometimes better than a regular teacher because I take the time to make sure they really do learn and understand what they are doing."

Some home schooling parents also questioned the capabilities and qualifications of public school teachers. Michelle's comment summarized that of several participants. She said, "There are many teachers who have the degree but are still not capable of teaching well." Betty pointed out "many [public school teachers] couldn't pass the competency test for teachers so they quit giving the competency test."

Inadequate Instruction

Many home schooling parents responded to this concern by referring to studies that have shown that home schooled children usually score above their grade level on standardized tests. Some parents acknowledged that this concern might be accurate in some cases, but it does not apply to their own children. Home schooling parents are in agreement that they can provide more depth; variety, and individualization in their children's learning experiences. Lori explained, "I utilize more resources than most teachers will and also a wider variety. We aren't limited to what is in our textbook. We learn by doing also."

Gail responded by criticizing the education available in public schools. She reported, "In five years of public school, my daughter never got beyond the Civil War in history. Each year they would start up with Columbus, progress to the Thirteen Colonies and the Revolutionary War, and

get all the way to Civil War and then the school year would be over with. She literally knew no American history beyond the Civil War."

The parents in this study believed they were providing more than a minimum education. Several speculated that public school superintendents were not familiar with successful home schooling experiences. Sally explained, "They're just seeing the ones that have had problems." She added that superintendents know nothing about children who have always been home schooled.

Children Returning to Public Schools Below Grade Level

Some parents countered this concern by referring to poor achievement levels in public schools. Some parents also questioned the uses of standardized tests. Gail asserted, "All children do not learn all subjects on the same time table. The school should fit the child, not the child fit the system. We are forcing children to be cookie-cutter children, built from the same box. We are not encouraging individuality." Pat stated "Children perform at the level they are at, not what they are expected to do."

When children do return to traditional schools and perform below grade level, home schooling may not be the reason. Two participants noted these children may have been performing below grade level when they began home schooling.

Social Isolation

Several participants laughed when asked about this concern. One said, "they don't know what they're talking about." Another dismissed this concern as a "myth" about home schooling. Most participants listed numerous activities their children are involved in through home schooling organizations, in the communities, and with their churches.

Several parents explained that the socialization of home schooled children is more natural than the socialization of children in traditional schools. They observed their children are outgoing,

confident, and comfortable with people of all ages in various situations. Some parents condemned the limited opportunities and artificial constraints imposed in traditional schools. For example, Gail charged that schools promote age-segregation. Children are not able to socialize with children that are not in their own grade level." Furthermore, home schooled children "weren't forced to sit and listen and only talk when raising their hands. They had time to actually play and converse with their friends, ask questions of adults freely, and participate in conversations as they wished. That is true socialization."

Some parents felt they had more control over the social interactions their children were exposed to because of home schooling. As Michelle explained, "The good part about it is that I have better control over what kinds of socialization that they come in contact with. No drugs, no guns or knives, no cussing, [or] bad behavior." Marie acknowledged her child is isolated during learning time, but felt this is positive since it "keeps them from being distracted."

Church schools and support groups for home schoolers in Alabama offer numerous opportunities for socialization for children and parents. One newsletter from an Alabama home schooling organization included opportunities for academic competitions, theater auditions, dance and orchestra performances, a piano recital, gym days, several films, and field trips to a local restaurant, television station, zoo, and museums.

The participants in this survey all expressed confidence in their ability to educate their children mentally, morally, and spiritually. All felt their children were receiving a better education than they would in Alabama schools. Most acknowledged that home schooling sometimes fails, but feel the majority of home schooling experiences are successful. The participants also asserted that their children were confident people who were becoming rooted in a value system that will serve

them for life. Home schoolers also feel their children have a realistic view of society because they are able to interact with a broad range of people.

Access to Public School Services

Home schoolers in Alabama have virtually no contact with public schools. None of the participants in this study reported seeking services from their local public schools. Participants in this study expressed different views on the issue. Gail summed up the divergent points of view when she said, "I am of very mixed minds about this issue. I chose to remove my children from the public schools and therefore don't think that the public school should have to provide any services for my child. On the other hand, I do pay my taxes. My tax money helps support the local public school. It would be nice to be able to use that money for my own children's education. There is very little, though, that I have seen the public schools provide, that I can't find offered somewhere else in the community."

Several home schooling parents expressed confidence in their ability to provide for their children without the assistance of public schools. Both Christian home schoolers and unschoolers have a concern that greater contact would be detrimental to the home schooling experience. Betty explained, "If they participated in any school services, all the things that I removed them from would still be there!" She also expressed a concern that "with their offering of services will come requirements and regulations." Home schoolers in Alabama generally feel that the lack of contact with public schools works to their advantage since they do not have to answer to any public official or abide by external regulations.

Conclusions

Alabama public school superintendents identified protecting the child from negative social influences and the explicit teaching of morals and values as the most commonly espoused reasons

for home schooling. The parents interviewed in this study expressed similar concerns but it would be inaccurate to say parents and administrators are in complete accord. Parents in this study placed tremendous value on providing individual attention to their children, raising confident, caring, and well-rounded people, and developing a life-long love of learning. Superintendents consistently felt these issues were not the main concerns of home schoolers.

The criticisms of traditional schools expressed by participants in this study were based on their own experiences and observations. This indicates they are not opposed to public schools simply on principle. Instead they see a "frustrated system" in which teachers have too many students with too many problems to be effective and caring. They oppose the "cookie-cutter mentality" in which children are expected to conform to rules and regulations. Both Christian home schoolers and unschoolers believe they can provide a more individualized and nurturing environment for learning. This is not entirely consistent with the conventional wisdom that religion and social issues are the primary causes of home schooling in Alabama.

If school officials see home schoolers simply as people who are voluntarily outside the mainstream, then the school officials have little reason to acknowledge their criticisms and concerns. Their grievances, however, are consistent with the criticisms of other commentators (for example, Sarason, 1996; Slattery, 1996). Home schooling parents in this study found the quality of education, the quality of life, and the quality of socialization lacking. School personnel should address these concerns to be sure that all children have access to a humane and meaningful education. Public school officials must recognize that home schooling is a growing movement and that they do not have monopoly control of education within their districts. If pubic school personnel perceive themselves as operating in a competitive market, they are more likely to pay attention to the needs of their clients.

The laws regarding home schooling in Alabama provide great freedom for home schoolers and they are strongly opposed to any changes that would impose restrictions. Some parents would like to be able to educate their children at home without enrolling in a church school. These families have been able to find or establish a church school that meets their needs. A few would also like to be able to use some of their tax dollars to educate their own children. In general, however, home schooling parents value the freedom they currently have and would not be willing to relinquish any of it. Some home schoolers have no interest in a relationship with public schools; others would like to have access. Home schooling families are confident in their ability to provide for their children. School officials and legislators need to be aware that home schooling can be a successful experience.

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